

Concluding notes on a remarkable conference

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The *Naturally Emerson Conference* was quite a unique event as we may gather not only from the hereby published essays but by referring to the material circumstances in which it occurred. Under the auspices of ULICES and the School of Arts and Humanities of the University of Lisbon, a handful of international scholars, together with their Portuguese peers, American Studies students and researchers as well as occasional guests, celebrated the Emersonian legacy in such a spirit and with such gusto that it genuinely emulated those reunions of that company of eccentrics, in Carlos Baker's words, who thrived around Ralph Waldo Emerson and placed Concord on world maps. The parallel with the Transcendentalist group and the reference that goes beyond a single name and identity is intentional, in as much as it acknowledges the reach of a personal, individual influence and simultaneously brings out the historical period in which an enduring United States cultural tradition was fostered as well as the many offshoots it has produced to this day.

A fair appreciation of the three components in the subtitle of this international meeting, *Creative Reading, Self-Reliance and Cultural Agency*, highlights the diversity of fields to which Emerson and his company of eccentrics reach out. As the conference ran, the launching of *Natural in Verso*, a bilingual anthology edited by José Duarte and Margarida Vale de Gato, was indeed prompted by the need to find a literary conveyor of such a reach, as if Emerson's challenge to the men and women of his time, which Teresa Cid's "Foreword" highlights, were not subject to the wearing out of the centuries and could find material testimonial in these pieces produced by women and men of different allegiances and nationalities, who, however, lent nineteenth-century images and feelings to the emotional coloring of our times.

The diversity of presentations may give an idea of the breadth of the conference. Rochelle Johnson, Professor of English and Environmental

Studies at The College of Idaho, was invited to deliver the opening plenary lecture on “Transcendental Entanglements: The Role of ‘Universal Spirit’ amid a Cosmos of Becoming”, and she struck a fundamental chord as she claimed that Emerson’s endorsement of the universal spirit called for individual self-reliance as well as cosmic engagement, the spiritual figuring in such a process as a bedrock against an exclusively materialistic understanding of life. Johnson brought Ralph Waldo Emerson and other Transcendentalists, namely Thoreau, into the heart of contemporary dilemmas and environmental concerns, and her presentation was an appropriate doorway into the speculative bend of some of the participants’ contributions to the debate. It was the case of, for instance, Joseph Urbas’s, who challenged current-trend-metaphor-driven readings of Emerson in favor of acknowledging the metaphysical ground of Emersonian thought; or, of Mario Avelar, who claimed that modern identity as featured in Charles Taylor’s conceptual framing was clearly indebted to the nineteenth-century precursor; or, finally, of Paul Borges, who argued that Emerson, Whitman, and Thoreau’s concept of the self within the totality of being was borrowed from the Indian spiritual scriptures titled *The Upanishads*.

A more pragmatic approach to Transcendentalism was offered by Viriato Soromenho-Marques, who explored Emersonian influences in Henry David Thoreau, showing how deeply they operate, for instance, in the field of cultural agency, and how, on such an account, *Walden* may feature as a forerunner of contemporary environmental writings. In this same vein, but giving it a particularly contemporary turn, Lanka Horstink’s presentation emphasized “the struggle for self-reliance” and linked it to “free agency in food and seed production”, thus providing a theoretical framing to *Seed Act*, the docu-film directed by Sara Braga. Focusing on small-scale agriculture, the documentary illustrated how biodiversity and changed feeding habits may be regarded as an antidote to environmental collapse, thus offering us a truly ecological perception of the human habitat and suggesting how such a perception may win over the growing anxiety about the exhaustion of the earth’s resources.

Alternative ways to established modes of living are at the core of Ecocriticism and Nature Writing, with literary antecedents that go back to the Transcendentalist view of the world. This was a strain that ran throughout the conference and which found literary expression in a good

number of the papers presented, along with Emerson's literary influence on a variety of contemporary writers. Nuno Marques explored Lawrence Buell's distinction between a first and second wave of Ecocriticism, elaborating on their distinctive features, the former, literary and denunciation-oriented, the latter, dealing with the material world of garbage or toxic waste. His conclusive remarks held a note of hope which included a reference to the Anthropocene as an envisioned future stage of humankind characterized by the human impact upon Earth geology and ecosystems.

Generally-speaking, the conference was organized as a series of panels thematically integrated and clustered around the keynote lectures. As the above remarks illustrate, contributions were split along two axes, one focusing on Emerson and the Transcendentalists' effort to substantiate an alternative worldview against the onrushing capitalist system, raw expansion at the cost of Native Indians, slavery of other human beings for profit and prevailing materialistic goals; the other, examining their legacy as appropriated in subsequent years and decades by literary practitioners, philosophers, cultural critics, linguists, more succinctly, all those involved in the study of human expression and the appraisal of human agency. Such a split ran across the different panels and, on such an account, the sway between the past and the present was constant and enlivened the debates, a dynamic that resurfaces in this collection of essays gathered around similar concerns.

Some of the approaches offer, as already mentioned, unusual angles on questions of Emersonian identity, adding depth to the age in which a truly distinctive American culture was founded. For instance, the focus of Isabel Oliveira Martins on Ralph Waldo Emerson as a "prolific traveler", the established relation to issues of the "Self", the link to basic tenets in several of his writings, shed light on an angle of Emerson's life and literary production that had not received much critical attention until recently.¹ Pedro Madeira and Rute Beirante, in their turn, offered new perspectives

¹ This issue is also discussed by R. Jackson Wilson in the essay "Emerson as Lecturer: Man Thinking Man Saying", where he argues that Emerson's adult and public life were forged in intensive travelling and communication with his lyceum audiences. However, the link with Emerson's identity and philosophical writings is to my knowledge raised for the first time in Oliveira Martins's essay. (Cf. *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson* 77).

on central issues in *Nature* by a change of focus, the former through the lens of Edgar Allan Poe, the latter through that of Herman Melville. Crucial as parody and distortion of the 1836 book on nature is to the analysis of *Eureka*, its brilliant rendering of a sublime “oneness” in terms of aesthetic theory does not invalidate, merely provides, a different platform from which the outreach of Emersonian diversity may be observed, while the contradictory response of Herman Melville in his literary achievement mirrors depth of character, suggesting a more complex identity than that of the naïve Transcendentalist.

As evidenced by the essays in this volume, the legacy of Ralph Waldo Emerson extends beyond gender boundaries, reaching into different forms of culture, from societal use to entertainment and the arts. Such a legacy is visible in contemporary poets, namely in Archie Randolph Ammons and Mark Strand, discussed by Josef Ja ab and Jeffrey Childs, respectively. Thematic borrowings about nature and poetry in the former, and similitude of strategies in what regards the latter’s appropriation of metaphoric levels, legitimate the foundational (and bewitching) role of Emerson as a translator of experience into the artifact of poetry. Reinaldo Silva took up the question again when he focused on Portuguese-American culture in the United States. A given influence, however, is not necessarily spelt in similar stylistic modes or even in the use of similar tropes to embody lyrical or fictional emotion. Flowers may share the garden with vegetables without abolishing the pleasure of men and women in nature.

Borders are alien to Emerson’s experience and therefore to his legacy. They are literally abolished, as Duarte Braga’s panel contribution made evident, when two twentieth-century Indian poets from Goa, Paulino Dias and Adeodato Barreto, model their poetry after Emerson’s “Brahma”. They are dislocated as Fernanda Luísa Feneja examined Rachel Carson’s successful attempts at creating a hybrid language to convey her scientific inquiry into nature, earning for herself a distinguished place among scientists with environmental concerns. Borders are metaphorically abolished again, when, according to Alexandra Urakova, the thematic layer in the essay “Gifts” finds echoes in the works of Marcel Mauss, Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Marion and Zygmunt Bauman. Interestingly, all these twentieth-century thinkers traversed the boundaries between several fields of knowledge: sociology and anthropology (Mauss); philosophy and literature *inter alia*

(Derrida); philosophy and theology (Jean-Luc Marion); sociology and philosophy (Bauman). From their different points of view and their distinctive allegiances, these instances are witness to cross-cultural convergence among the different participants or explorers of territories that are not the exclusive domain of a particular inquiry but, as the centuries go by, become, so to say, a common lot for shared perceptions and worldviews.

Taking the cue from one of the scholars and critics included in this volume, Lawrence Rhu, the centrality of Emersonian influence in the culture of the United States is better judged when featured in the confrontation of creative work from different fields. One century after Walt Whitman's disruption of the boundaries of poetic form and language, Stanley Cavell's invitation of "ordinary language" and "passionate utterance" into his own philosophic inquiry, the inclusion within its premises of film and literary study, the preference for the autobiographical mode, cannot but reinforce the pattern that evokes familiar resonances. The blueprint is distinctively cultural and indigenous, even when it borrows from many other cultures and philosophies. It was laid out in a "little azure-coloured *Nature*", where language features as the central chapter and, as such, bridges the discontinuity between what exists *per se* and its appropriation and use by the perceiving mind.

On the other hand, Emerson's reliance on visual imagery in his journals and essayistic writings found in American cinema a natural habitat, along with themes of a distinctive Emersonian ring. Teresa Castilho's insightful analysis of *Boyhood*, a coming-of-age drama film directed by Richard Linklater, underlined features of the movie as an artful variation upon the Emersonian concept of the "original call", showing how such a theme is developed as the camera follows the twelve-year boy's quest for the meaning of his life and how such a quest returns to the spectator a protagonist who embodies the virtues of honesty and integrity, which have been featured as national ideals since they were extolled as traits of the self-reliant decent *Americanus*. Mark Twain gave them individualistic semblance in the proto-character of Huckleberry Finn, and we are able to recognize the progeny in a succession of films, of which I mention two for their comparative closeness to Linklater's, Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life* (2011) and Robert Redford's *A River Runs Through It* (1992). The most obvious differences between them, however, also cut across

Emersonian territory. In these movies, the process of growing-up engages a transcendental view of experience which Linklater exchanges for the flow of the twelve years wherein the six-year-old boy grows into an eighteen-year-old freshman, not to mention the emphasis on the “here and now” of such a process.

The appropriation of a philosophy of life by cinema makes evident Emerson’s cultural reach and widespread influence. He held interrelacional practice as the proper method, from his earliest 1836 book to the very last one, *The Conduct of Life* (1860), staging man as a “bundle of relations” and becoming the living proof of the concept in his own writings (*The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Vol. V, 1835-1838 266). As such, he moves back and forth between the autobiographical and the essayistic modes, breaks boundaries between prose and verse, inviting language, aesthetics, metaphysics, rhetoric, natural science, history, psychology, in short, whatever pertains to the realm of knowledge and sensibility, into his different inquiries about nature and human agency. References to many of these perspectives, as becoming of the variety of angles on the human condition, are to be found in the *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks*, which have been and are still intriguing Emersonian scholars and readers alike. There is — and there could hardly have been — no mention of movies, but there are plenty of references to music, musicians and to all musical genres, including the liturgical, as well as the rhetorical use whenever the comparison or the metaphor seems appropriate. Along with other acoustical annotations about sound, these occasions betray Emerson as a sensorial writer whose experience of the world is inclusive and therefore appealing to our age of experimental orientation.

Christina Katopodis, who integrated the panel on “Sound and Transmission”, approached the acoustical Emerson from an unusual angle, examining the role of silence in the Emersonian soundscape and presenting an unusual paper, which, in her own words, deals with “the musical semiotics of nature, from her rests and breaths to her rhythms”. Following on Emerson’s footsteps, natural environment becomes the place where, liberated from the shackles of egotism, the human being is able to access full harmony. Most interestingly, Katopodis’s focus on “breath”, “rhythm”, “silence”, and “pause” suggested the continuity between what to Ralph

Waldo Emerson was the mute music of nature and the trends of American music composed by Charles Ives and, later, by John Cage, who endowed the trope of silence with structural functionality in their compositions. Integrating the same panel, Anabela Duarte's "*Lingua Vernacula* in Thoreau's *Walden*: The Owl, The Echo and The Bell", added a complementary point of view which underscored how this disciple and friend of Emerson was able to disrupt conventional verbal/musical patterns. In consonance with his ideological and ontological posture, Thoreau devised an innovative pattern of human/non-human sounds that has become what this ULICES researcher designated as a *lingua franca* of alternative impact.

As these "Notes" draw closer to the end, it is opportune to consider the role of the two roundtables and the workshop in the general economy of the conference as they relate directly to its thematic engagement with "Creative Reading, Self-Reliance and Cultural Agency". The same may be stated about David Greenham's plenary lecture on "Emerson's Creation and Criticism", who chose to depart from apparently contradictory Emersonian statements about the nature of creative reading and creative writing as well as about interpretation. Greenham was intent on understanding "to what extent [Emerson] successfully overcomes the problems that he, as a critic, creates for himself as an artist", a challenging proposal in as much as the clash between the poet and the critic might betray an insurmountable identity split and a breach in coherent thinking. Illustrating his argument with abundant quotations from Emerson's *Journals*, David Greenham not only invited his audience to follow in the footsteps of a brilliant argument but, in his recurrent quotations, also provided ample evidence of creative writing of the best kind. His lecture was, indeed, a theoretical digression on some of the issues that the morning workshop supervised by Terry Gifford on "Nature Writing" had raised. Attended by a numerous audience, the workshop afforded the opportunity to experiment with creative writing techniques, after having dealt with questions of form in "Amulet", the ecological poem by Ted Hughes, as well as in other poems. The participants in the workshop were, then, invited to produce a prose piece related to one of the poems, which was followed by a final discussion of the pieces presented.

Greenham's lecture was also a fitting framework to the roundtable chaired by Margarida Vale de Gato, with its focus on "Creative Readings,

Creative Writings and Language". A poet and translator herself, she coordinated the debate among the other writers in a session that explored the subject of creative writing, both as practice and course supervising.² Each participant came forward with his/her own personal experience, and those who supervise or have supervised courses on this matter mainly dealt with their composition, offering variants on procedure. They generally agreed upon the notion that the process thrives on its own dynamics and such a thing as contradiction may have as fruitful a resolution as in Emerson, who makes the most of creative reading and creative writing in his journals, essays and poetry. Language, the third thematic component of the debate received little attention from the panelists who, probably, had not had enough time to explore such a complex item. Present-day orientation was thus unexplored as was unexplored the link to Emerson's observations on a subject about which he writes extensively not only in *Nature*, but also in many other texts, providing a pattern built on the yoking of images from discrete semantic fields into the typical visual assemblage of the American literary text.

The second roundtable, which I chaired, gathered scholars from a variety of areas and focused on "Emerson's Legacy".³ Regrettably, the role

² Panel composition: Margarida Vale de Gato, a poet and translator, is Professor of American Literature at the School of Arts and Humanities (Chair); Diana Almeida, a practicing photographer, is involved in creative writing projects, including one at the Museum Collection Berardo; Luís Carmelo, a prolific novelist and essayist, founded an online creative writing school (EC.ON); Rui Zink, a well-known fiction author, has supervised creative writing courses in Portugal from the early 1990s onwards; and Terry Gifford, who has authored seven books of poetry, introduced practice-based Ph.D. programs at Leeds University in Theatre, Dance and Creative writing, and is a member of the Spanish Group GIECO (Literature and Environment). He is currently *Profesor Honorífico* at the Universidad de Alicante.

³ Panel composition: Teresa F. A. Alves is Emeritus Professor of American Studies at the School of Arts and Humanities and a researcher at ULICES (Chair); Teresa Cid is Director of ULICES and Professor of American Studies at the School of Arts and Humanities; Lawrence Rhu holds the Todd Chair in the Italian Renaissance at the University of South Carolina and has extensively published in Italian, English and American Renaissance literature; Isabel Alves is Professor of American Literature and Culture at UTAD and a Researcher at ULICES on Environment and Ecocriticism; Christina Katopodis is an English Ph.D. student at the CUNY Graduate Center and

of Emerson as a translator and as a historical agent was not subject to a wider appreciation in the conference. It would have been interesting to consider whether his practice as a literary translator overcomes or not the problems that he as a critic and interpreter of other writers' work posed to himself. It was further regretted the absence of a body of critical work, a panel, perhaps, on Emerson's political action, which was only indirectly addressed during the conference. It was as if his situation as a citizen had been completely severed from his creative achievement in those years marked by economic depression, with its attending trail of socio-economic difficulties and unrest, westward expansion and injury to the Native population, and finally, by the Civil War and racial prejudice.⁴ Besides being a poet, a critic and a philosopher, Ralph Waldo Emerson was also the man who opposed the "Fugitive Slave Law", the removal of Native Indian tribes from their fertile lands, and who sided with the Abolitionists, was distressed by John Brown's death, loathed Manifest-Destiny policies, and who entrusted *The Dial* to the editorship of Margaret Fuller, a friend and the well-known champion of the cause of women. In his own time, Emerson made history and induced many others to adopt a changed view of life and of the values that guided them in the "construction" of their own worlds.

In a way, the roundtable on "Emerson's Legacy" summed up the contributions of the conference participants as they have been previously described in these "Notes", inviting the audience to join in the recollection of what in our time calls for indebtedness to the influential reach of Emerson, Thoreau, and other Transcendentalists. Notions such as self-reliance, cultural agency, the perception of human endeavor, the worth of common man and woman, environmental concern and the rising consciousness about the survival of humanity and its dependence on the

teaches at Hunter College. Her research in nineteenth-century American Literature includes Darwin's influence on Emerson and William James, as well as the Transcendentalist Pragmatist underpinnings of feminist thought.

⁴ In his introduction to *The Cambridge Companion*, Joel Porte alerts us to the "danger of neglecting the actual record in its density and richness in favor of [criticism's] own theses — seeing Emerson, for example, as an endless seeker, with no past at his back, a sort of Transcendental rocket racing into trackless space and attempting to drag American Literature with it" (4).

preservation of nature, are all endowed with the Emersonian quality of mind and of his influential writings upon the group of men and women who gravitated around him. They began by sketching the profile of what, less than a century before, had become a nation with a political constitution, but without real cultural autonomy. As such, they stand at the roots of a new worldview and a new sensibility to alternative proposals and solutions that helped pave the way to the “The American Century”. On its way, and starting in Emerson’s time, cultural autonomy has been recognizably diversified by numerous tributaries that occasionally influence, at times hide, but do not swerve from the powerful undercurrent of its destination. Taking an active part in historical occurrences such as the abolishing of slavery and the defense of Native Indian culture, Emerson and his circle have also had a real impact on the history of the world at large, which for a time looked up to United States as the model it coveted.

By placing the emphasis on “Self-reliance, Creative Reading and Cultural Agency” the Lisbon conference acknowledged origins, while by submitting Emerson’s legacy to the lens of time appropriated transition and shift in paradigms so characteristic of the present age. The willingness to evaluate how change modifies but still validates a given legacy, lends these final “Notes” a particularly symbolic character for they are intended as a small tribute to the group of scholars and researchers who debated Emerson and his company of eccentrics in an enthusiastic but simultaneously humble vein, for they knew that they were not able to exhaust their subject-matter and would merely further the relentless march of inquiry towards other opportunities and times.

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